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ABSTRACT

In fall 1996, California's Los Angeles Harbor College instituted the use of a drop notice survey to notify instructors when students dropped their course. Students dropping a course checked off their reasons on a notice card, which was recorded for research and student service purposes and sent to the instructor within the day. In addition, the students were asked to complete a brief questionnaire regarding their reasons for dropping the class, what factors might have helped them stay enrolled, and which services they made use of at the college. During the first 4 weeks of fall 1996, 768 drop notices were processed, while an additional 1,563 were processed after 4 weeks but during the period for allowed withdrawals. An analysis of all 2,331 drop questionnaires completed indicated that financial reasons accounted for 37% of the withdrawals, while course related reasons, including content, teaching, difficulty, and falling behind in class accounted for another 34%. Family and personal problems such as illness accounted for 19% of the reasons, while no need for a class and other responses, including many students who were missing the prerequisite for the class, accounted for 15%. Finally, based on a sample of 500 forms, approximately 14% of the students had requested a student service. The drop notice form and response tables are appended. (HAA)

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Increasing Instructor and Student Communication through Drop Notice Surveys

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Los Angeles Harbor College
Office of Research and Development

JC 970 330

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Increasing Instructor and Student Communication Through Drop Notice Surveys

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Abstract

During Fall 1996, Los Angeles Harbor College instituted the use of a Drop Notice Survey to serve as notification to instructors when a student dropped their course. Any student dropping a course checked off their reason(s) for dropping. The form was recorded for research and student service purposes and passed on to the instructor within the day. The form included the student phone for immediate contact by instructors.

During the first four weeks of instruction, 768 drop notices were processed. After the first four weeks of instruction, but during the allowable period for course withdrawal, 1,563 additional students dropped courses. Financial reasons (grouping work hours, financial, and seek job) accounted for 37% of the reasons. Course related reasons (grouping course content, teaching, difficulty, and behind in the class) accounted for 34% of the reasons. Family and personal problems such as illness accounted for 19%. Many of the "other" responses related to missing the prerequisite for a class. No need for a class and other responses accounted for 15% of the reasons.

Instructors found they were able to reassure students who felt they were falling too far behind, refer students to tutors when appropriate, and otherwise encourage students. What began as a survey tool for gathering information on reasons for drops, turned into a valuable communication tool from student to instructor. Students appreciated the opportunity to voice their reasons for dropping a class, and instructors appreciated the prompt feedback. We are now in the process of setting up scannable forms and plan to continue using the surveys as a method of continuing communication between student and instructor.

Introduction

Harbor College is a campus of approximately 8,000, primarily part-time, students. Located near a major freeway approximately twenty miles from downtown Los Angeles, Harbor serves an ethnically diverse population. Harbor College's trademark is a personal, friendly campus.

During Fall 1996, a form was introduced at Los Angeles Harbor College in the attempt to gather information regarding the reason for students dropping particular classes. Previously, a questionnaire was given only to those students who were dropping all classes and withdrawing from college.

Since withdrawal rates from individual classes are quite high, especially in certain core courses such as English and math, the campus was concerned with the reasons for drops both during the first four weeks of drops, and after the four week grace period. It was decided that the form would include a variety of possible responses, as well as a section for the student to check off a desire for contact by a particular student service. After completion of the form, a

copy was sent immediately to any student service marked, the instructor of the class, and the researcher.

After an initial collection of questionnaires in Summer 1996, it was determined that instructors found the reasons students dropped of great benefit. They requested that we add an optional field of telephone number so that they might easily call students. It was felt that students were sometimes dropping due to feeling too far behind in the class, or other reasons in which instructors felt they could help.

Although all students filled out the drop questionnaire, they were not required to check off a reason for drop, nor were they required to include their telephone number. However, nearly all students completed the form entirely, and many students added comments in the appropriate section of the questionnaire.

Procedures

Upon requesting a drop notice from Admissions and Records, students were given a brief questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire (see Appendix A.) was collected with the drop notice card and ensured nearly one hundred percent collection of questionnaires. Reasons for dropping a course were:

Work hours have changed
Ill or need medical attention
Family responsibility/crisis
Financial hardship
Need to seek or accept employment
Course content is not what I expected
Cannot relate to the teaching method
Course is too difficult
Do not need this course for major or job
Too far behind in assignments
Other reason

The form also included the following support services:

Learning Assistance Center (tutoring)
Financial Aid
Special Programs and Services
Counseling (including educational planning)
Health Services

Since the form was not yet developed in a scannable format, research was a slow and tedious process of sorting and counting responses. Initially, the form was designed as a temporary study to answer the question of reasons students dropped. The unexpected strong response from instructors to continue the feedback to them has necessitated pursuit of scannable forms for the future.

After the questionnaire copies were received by instructors, the instructor was free to pursue the information through direct contact with students, or simply gather information for future reference. Copies received by student services generated letter or telephone contacts from most services, in particular counseling and the Learning Assistance Center. The immediate

turnaround of the questionnaires was vital in order to give instructors and services the opportunity to contact students quickly enough to allow students to return to the class if possible. In addition, if students decided not to return to the class, they were given a prompt direct contact that would hopefully encourage the student for the coming semester and courses.

Results

All instructors received a copy of the form immediately. Department Chairs were given breakdowns within their department by section after the first four weeks and again at the end of the semester. Comparisons between day, evening, and Saturday students, as well as between early drops and later drops (recorded as withdrawals in their records) were made. The researcher distributed summary results to the entire campus using a brief newsletter format. The results shown here reflect the summary shared with the entire campus.

Figure 1.

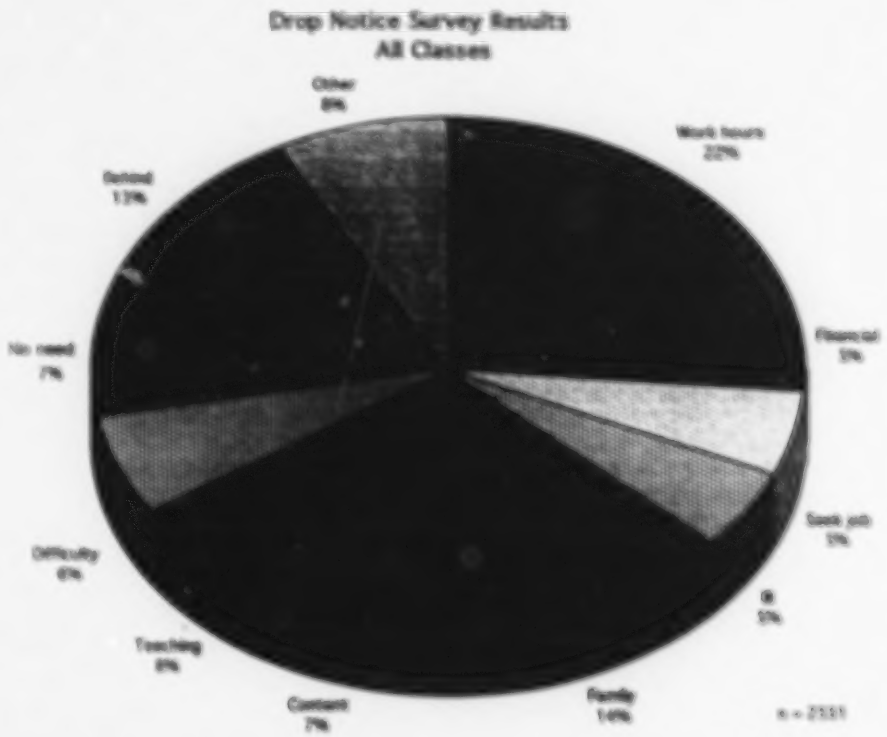


Figure 1. shows the percentage of each reason given by students for dropping regardless of when they dropped or when their class was conducted. Financial reasons (grouping work hours, financial, and seek job) accounted for 37% of the reasons. Course related reasons (grouping course content, teaching, difficulty, and behind in the class) accounted for 34% of the reasons. Family and personal problems such as illness accounted for 19%. Many of the "other" responses related to missing the prerequisite for a class. No need for a class and other responses accounted for 15% of the reasons.

Figure 2.

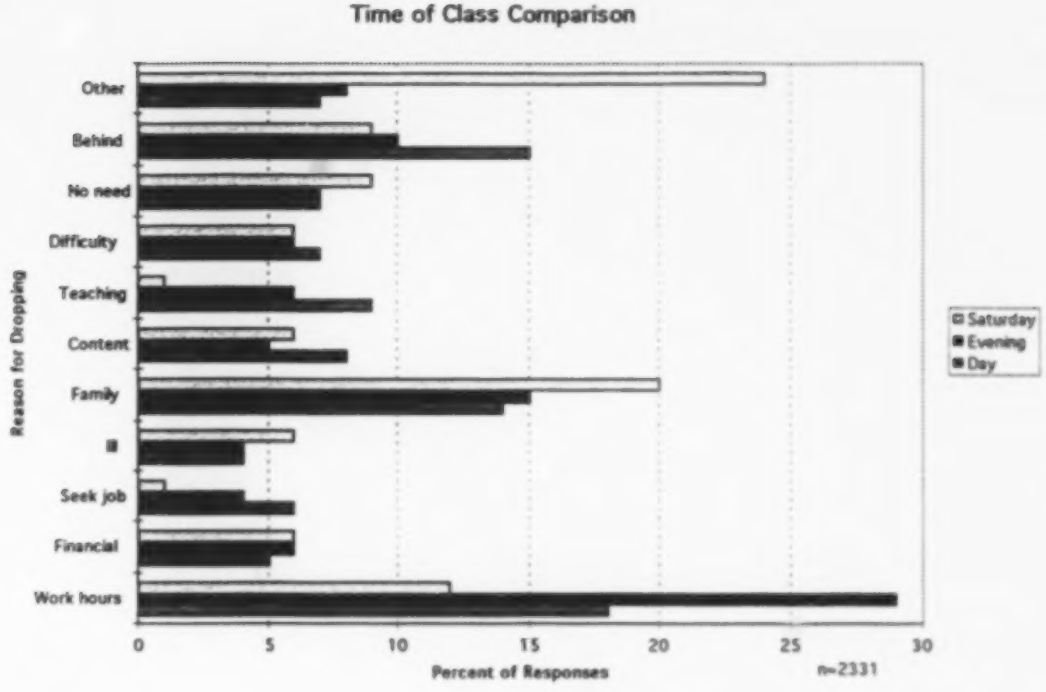


Figure 2. displays the differences between reasons based on the time of the class. Day, evening, and Saturday classes were separated based on the class schedule definition. Saturday classes were more likely to be dropped due to personal reasons including family and a large group of "other". (This is similar to past examination of summer session reasons for withdrawing from school.)

Evening students were far more likely to drop due to financial reasons (work hours, financial, and seek job). Day classes were most likely to drop due to course related issues (39%), followed by financial reasons (29%), then personal reasons (18%), and 14% other or no need for the class. Day students accounted for 63% of the forms.

Figure 3.

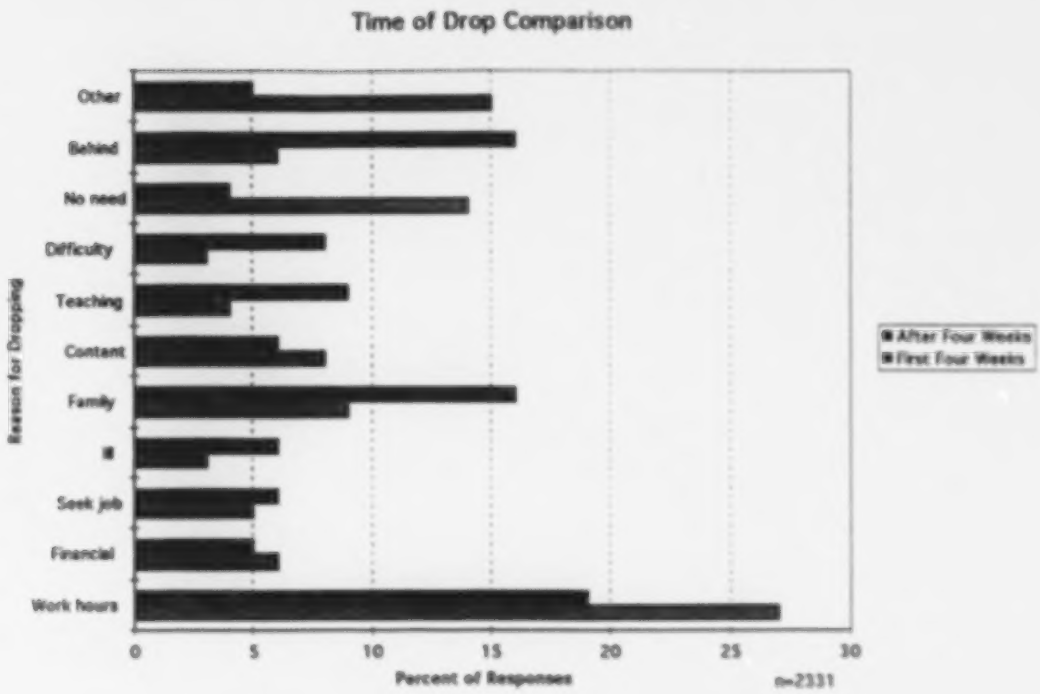


Figure 3. compares the reasons for "early" drops in the first four weeks of the semester and the drops following the first four weeks, but within the allotted time to receive a "W" for withdrawal. During the first four weeks, when 33% of the drops occurred, financial reasons accounted for 38% of the reasons, 29% were other or no need for the course, 21% were course related, and 12% were personal. The rest of the semester shifted to 39% course related (16% felt they were too far behind in the class), 30% work related, 22% personal, and 9% other or no need.

Other interesting results based on sampling 500 drop forms indicated that approximately 14% of the students' forms requested a student service. Counseling was the primary request, followed closely by financial aid, then tutoring, and special programs and services. Another sampling indicated that approximately 33% of the students were dropping one class, 34% were dropping two classes, and the remaining 33% were dropping three or more classes.

Conclusions

Although most of the matriculating students have been exposed to campus services, it is felt by campus personnel that the majority of our students, part-time and non-transferring, would benefit from a clearer understanding of the student services available. In particular, they do not know the location and hours of operation of various services. In addition, they are unfamiliar with the opportunities to improve their study habits, time management, and financial opportunities. The use of the drop notices and follow-up of student services is a strong attempt to help the student become more successful in college.

A comparison of withdrawals from college (see Appendix B.) and drops from individual classes yielded similar results. Financially related responses are the primary reasons students give for both. The campus is increasing their ability to help students manage financial responsibilities as they begin housing an EDD office on campus coordinated with the Job Placement Center. In addition, possibilities of flexible scheduling or course transfer for students whose work hours have changed during a semester is a necessary campus pursuit.

Course related issues are the responsibility of faculty, and since they account for a significant portion of reasons students drop, each department and instructor will evaluate the results of the drop forms as they receive them. In some cases, a clearer course description might be indicated ("Course content is not what I expected"), a review of prerequisites ("Course is too difficult"), and other action might be pursued. In addition to examining the support services needed, the purpose of this study is to provide feedback to instructors for their use, and to provide information to departments to examine policies which might benefit the student's opportunity for success in college.

Future Implications

The results of the responses of faculty and student services have yet to be measured, primarily, quantifying the students' responses to the contacts. How many students decided to return to the class? How many students followed through with each of the student services offered? How many faculty members made direct contact with students after receiving the drop questionnaire? What were the instructors' assessments of the situation? Such questions warrant further examination.

Since the forms will be scannable in the near future, tracking by student through multiple classes and multiple semesters will be possible. Also, the choice of "Did not meet the prerequisite" needs to be added. Several students wrote this reason on the form. As the campus increases prerequisite validation and adds mandatory, rather than recommended prerequisites, this option will be increasingly important to track. These are the areas we hope to pursue in the coming year.

Appendix A.
Drop Notice Form

L.A. Harbor College

DROP NOTICE

Instructor's Name _____ Class Section No. ☐☐☐☐ (i.e. 0379) Course _____ (i.e. English 101)

_____ / _____ / _____

Student's Last Name First Name Middle Name

Student I.D. No. ☐☐☐ - ☐☐ - ☐☐☐☐ Phone _____ Date _____

To Student: Please check reasons for dropping course.

PERSONAL

- ☐ Work hours have changed
- ☐ Ill or need medical attention
- ☐ Family responsibility/crisis
- ☐ Financial hardship
- ☐ Need to seek or accept employment

ACADEMIC

- ☐ Course content is not what I expected
- ☐ Cannot relate to the teaching method
- ☐ Course is too difficult
- ☐ Do not need this course for major or job
- ☐ Too far behind in assignments

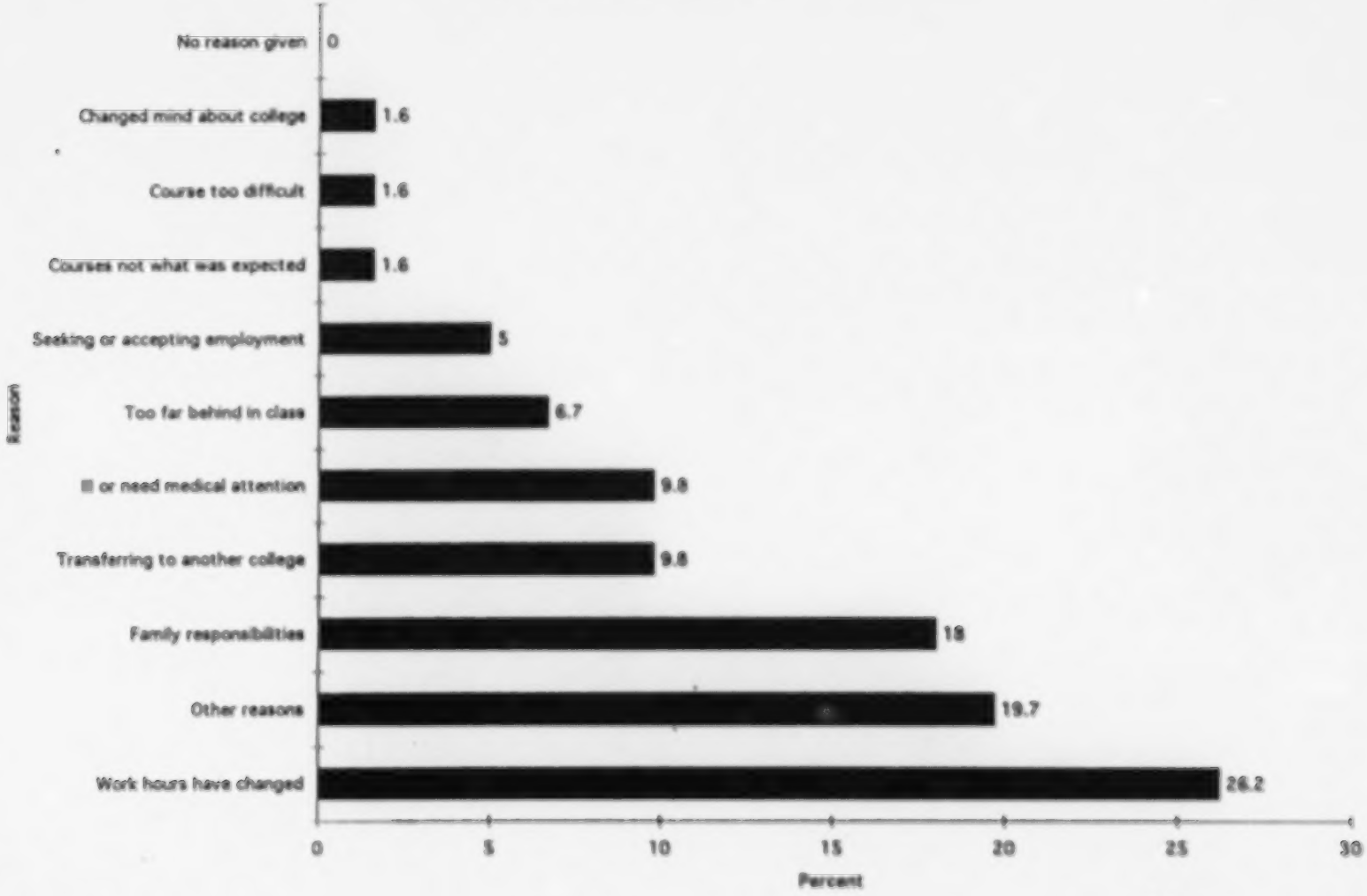
OTHER REASON _____

I am interested in receiving support services from ☐ Learning Assistance Center (tutoring), ☐ Financial Aid ☐ Special Programs and Services, ☐ Counseling (including educational planning), ☐ Health Services

Appendix B.
Fall 95/Spring 96
Withdrawal Survey Results

Fall 95/Spring 96
Withdrawal Surveys

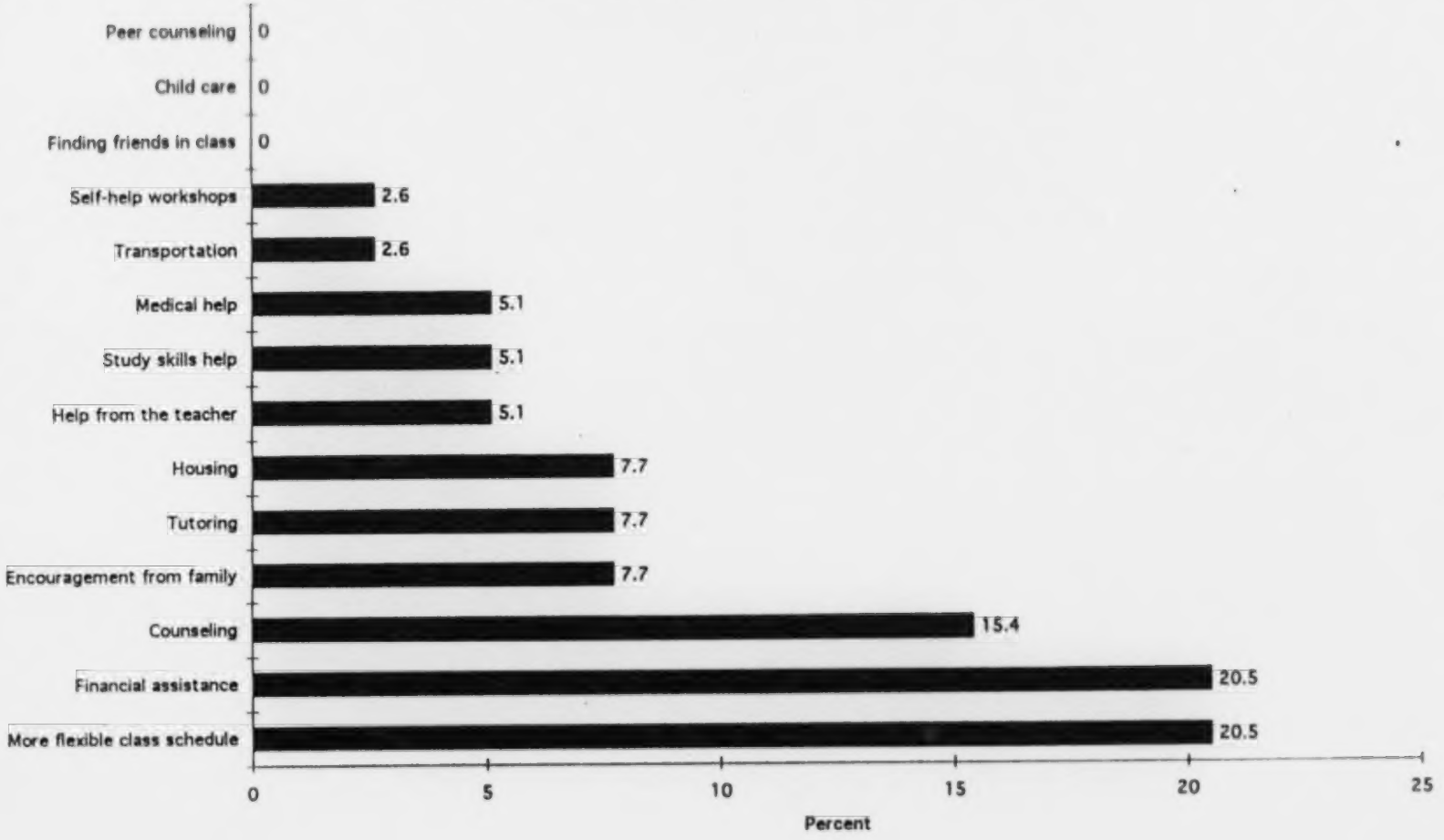
1. Why are you withdrawing from college?



n=47

Fall 95/Spring 96
Withdrawal Surveys

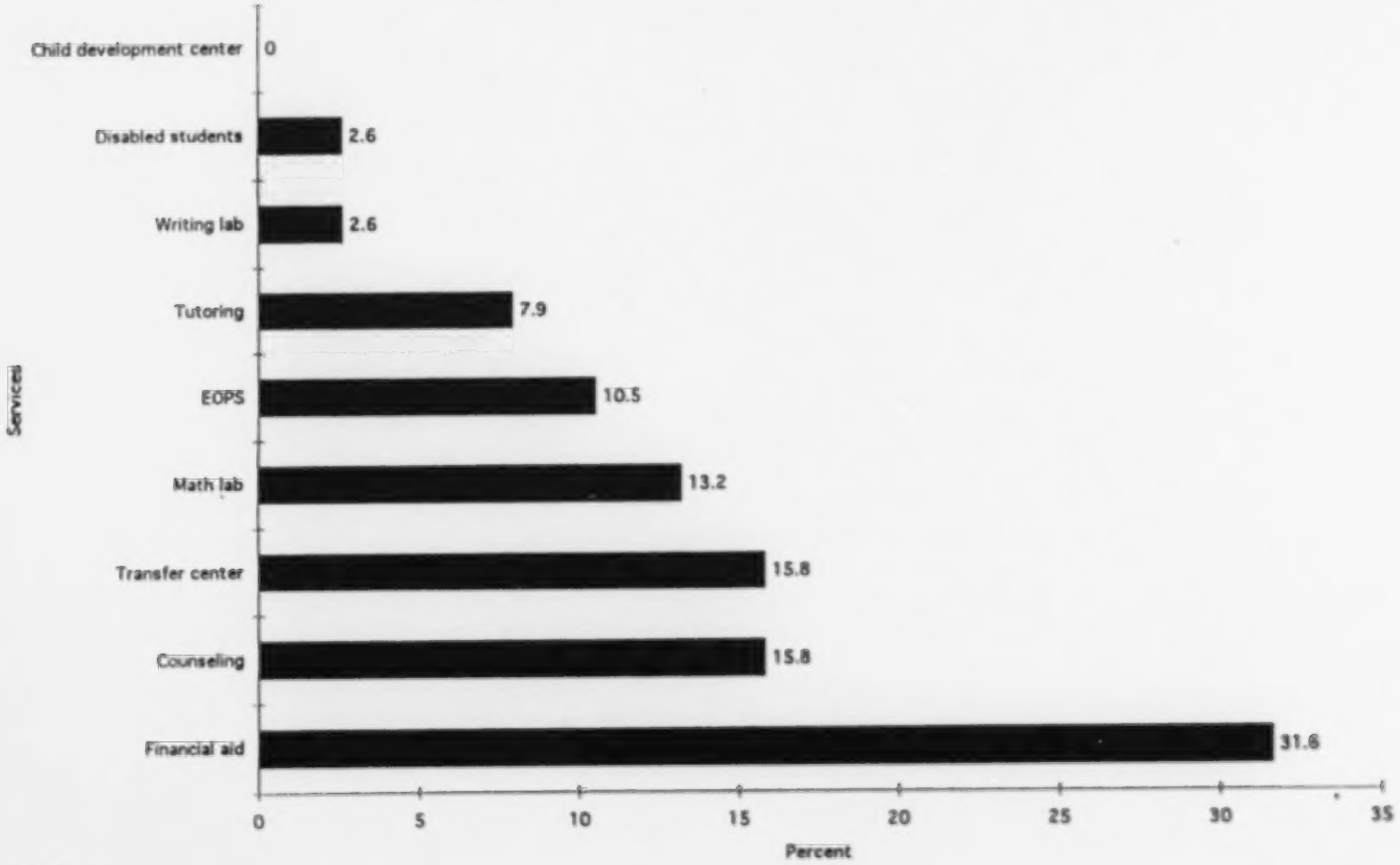
2. Which of the following might have helped you stay in college?



n=47

Fall 95/Spring 96
Withdrawal Surveys

3. Which support services did you use?



n=47